

Guilt as Catalyst: Exploring Human Transformation in the Works of Khaled Hosseini

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Abstract

This study explores the complex phenomena of guilt, analyzing its complex characteristics, underlying causes, and transformational impacts. The principal objectives include analyzing the behavioral changes in characters, investigating the underlying causes and their effects on individuals, analyzing the reasons behind the desire for forgiveness, and presenting guilt as a driving force behind reform and positive change. Hosseini's English novels are based on Erikson's psychosocial development theory and emphasize the ego's role in forming a person's sense of self. Qualitative analysis is used for this study to examine how guilt highlights the psychological complexities of forgiveness and tolerance in Hosseini's narratives and motivates beneficial social outcomes. The research aims to provide a deeper appraisal of guilt as a constantly evolving and varied driver of social reform with a focus on character development in literature.

Keywords: *Guilt, Psychosocial development, Forgiveness, Social reform, Khaled Hosseini's fiction.*

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1. Introduction

This study investigates the intricate connection between unorthodox conduct, personal fulfillment, and society expectations. It investigates the ways in which these actions affect moral judgments and social norms. By looking at personal fulfillment outside of social constraints, the research seeks to comprehend the differences in human conduct and how they affect the moral foundation of society. In addition to examining a wide range of topics, Hosseini's fiction delves into the socio-political, economic, and religious facets of human existence. Guilt is the most interesting issue among the many he covers in his novels; feelings are an essential component of being human. They help others know how they feel and comprehend any issues and attitudes regarding different types of partnerships. Several of the characters in his novels have come to terms with their transgressions, but some of them do not feel sorry about them. The purpose of this study is to investigate the root causes of the aforementioned issues as well as the anguish caused by guilt and regret following the infringement. Erikson (1950)'s psychosocial development theory offers a conceptual framework for understanding the shift from guilt to forgiveness.

Erikson's (1950) psychosocial development theory examines how a person's personality develops from infancy through old age while taking social and cultural factors into account. It discusses guilt, a problem that is prevalent in young children during playtime, and offers an analysis of feelings like forgiveness and kindness that are connected to guilt. The investigation can shed light on the intricate relationships that exist between cultural influences, personal growth, and emotional health. June Price Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing (2002) define guilt in their theoretical work *Shame and Guilt* as,

“Guilt involves tension, remorse, and regret over the ‘bad thing’ done. People amid a guilt experience often report a nagging focus or preoccupation with the transgression, thinking of it over and over, wishing they had behaved differently or could somehow undo the deed” (p.19).

Hosseini (2003) practices a melodramatic plot to convey vividly many sentimental aspects of human nature like regret, atonement, apology, and forgiveness behind guilt. Indeed, guilt has been judged as a negative and maladaptive emotion for a long time; various empirical studies prove it as a constructive and reformatory instrument to mend and repair relationships, as Erikson's (1950) psychoanalysis takes it as a positive factor.

In Hosseini's novels, the characters' guilt regulates their behavior and turns them into reformists for their victims. The conflict of mind and the reactions to some particular situations remain throughout life, however, varies. In almost all guilt-ridden characters, the sense of repentance, agitation for past acts, selfishness, and cruel steps destroyed others' lives as well. Guilt is a developmentally advanced self-conscious emotion that evaluates one's behavior and personality. Guilt also surfaces as a feeling that encourages offenders to induce reform in society. Feeling guilty turned into a source of relief for offenders and the behavior inclined toward the reform of society through psychoanalysis theory is a significant topic for research, which will also explore new ideas for other researchers.

2. Literature Review

Guilt has been one of the favorite topics for writers to discuss and present in related societies. Many contemporary Asian writers who have investigated this perspective on human psychology have used it as a recurring theme in their works. For instance, Aslam, a British Pakistani novelist, depicts the theme of guilt in his two novels: *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) and *The Wasted Vigil* (2008). The way the same issue is presented in the novels by another Pakistani author, Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* (2000) & *The Last White Man* (2022), can also be examined. Similarly, to this, Indian author Tharoor's book *Riot* (2001) centers on the concept of guilt. However, the style and portrayal of the guilt of Hosseini (2003) are vibrant and thought-provoking themes.

Greenspan (1995) is a well-known philosopher who has served greatly in this genus of study. She writes that one might feel at least a little guilty about

numerous breaches of the duty of faithfulness, such as charming someone, showing off, or misrepresenting one's political views in the name of social harmony, even while they have no negative effects on the people they are intended to help. The type of all-encompassing reference to harm—to the typical results of such behavior—that we would be inclined to make here would appear to restrict the emotion to agents who accept a utilitarian justification for the laws they feel guilty about breaking. However, it is at least plausible that someone might experience the emotion without having made a theoretical commitment to the matter, as well as for actions that, in general, appear to damage no one, such as breaking a few religious etiquette laws. If 'harm' is defined to include cases of offense when there is anguish over the rule breach itself, guilt over victimless sexual behavior, for example, would involve either attributing to the agent a mistake about the implications of his act or extending "harm" to cover cases of offense (Tharoor, 2001).

In the novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1851), it is not the public shame that accounts for all the troubles of the illicit relationship but in fact, it is a private thought that causes the emotional destruction of the characters that destroy their peace and comfort: "Thou shalt forgive me!" cried Hester, hurling herself onto the nearby leaves that had just fallen. "Let God punish! Thou shalt forgive!" (pp. 17-18); the guilt ultimately takes victims to seek forgiveness from society and God. It is a feeling of accountability for felonies. People feel guilty about their deeds, which kill their memory and never let them remain happy. A criminal accuses himself and keeps on continuing to punish himself. The study underlines that sometimes guilt is driven by some unconscious-mistaken deed and by good intentions as well.

People are forced to curb their self-indulgence and bigotry through guilt. Guilt is fundamentally a social feeling that is typically experienced when one has caused another to suffer a loss. We propose that because interpersonal guilt results from particular offenses, its influence on interpersonal conduct is geared at mending the relationships that the guilt-inducing act damaged. Particularly, guilt increases compassion toward others and seems to set off actions meant to

right certain social wrongs. This is the topic for doing research that has not been discussed before; although there is also a track for new researchers.

3. Research Methodology

The methodological approach used in this study is a critical description. Texts by Hosseini (2003-2022) are the main sources of inquiry through the lens of psychosocial development theory propounded by Erikson (1950). A vast psychological and philosophical content analysis of relevant material on guilt has inevitably been used as a source to achieve the objectives. A descriptive method of qualitative research is being used in Hosseini's texts to collect data to test objectives concerning the status of the study. Although it is a very extensive topic, however, the study is delimited to the fiction of Khalid Hosseini due to time and financial constraints.

4. Data Analysis

Guilt keeps our sense of self-worth at stake. It presents our disgusting image in front of us and forces us to repent of our offense and misconduct. Repentance changes thoughts arouse the feeling of moral conscience and put the guilty one in a situation where he realizes his violation and accepts his misconduct. Feelings of repentance, confession of sins, and seeking forgiveness are the hallmarks that develop a reformatory role of a guilty person in society.

4.1 Theory of Psychosocial Development

The eight phases of Erikson's (1950) psychosocial theory are each linked to a particular conflict or tension that people need to go through in order to develop to their full potential. These phases, which range from early childhood to old age, provide different difficulties that advance a person's total psychosocial growth. Recognizing these conflicts as developmental tasks highlights the notion that every stage presents particular objectives or benchmarks that people must reach in order to successfully progress. Resolving these disputes successfully helps people reach particular benchmarks that are essential for

psychological health, resulting in a lifetime of learning and development. Erikson's (1950) psychosocial conflicts provide a thorough grasp of the psychological problems people face throughout their lives and are seen as developmental tasks (1950). Erikson's theory of psychosocial development emphasizes the continuing psychosocial crises or conflicts that people encounter throughout their lives. These difficulties can resurface at stressful times or life transitions, and Erikson highlights the dynamic relationship that exists between people and their social surroundings.

Erikson's psychosocial theory emphasizes the relationship between psychological and social elements in human development, contending that social interactions as well as internal processes have an impact on identity creation and progress. According to the notion, development happens in a series of psychosocial stages and is genetically predetermined. Erikson highlighted the interaction between genetics and the process of development in his concepts (1950) of "epigenesis" and the "epigenetic principle. He believes that aspects of one's experiences shape future development, emphasizing the importance of understanding one's past to comprehend present identity.

He further states, "If life is sustained, hope must remain" (Erikson, 1964, p.88), though, "The sense of identity provides the ability to experience one's self as something that has continuity and sameness and to act accordingly" (Erikson, 1950, p. 124). He underscores the interconnectedness of personality and identity, the significance of hope in life, and the role of a coherent identity in shaping actions and interactions.

Erikson's theory emphasizes the importance of balancing psychosocial conflicts in developmental stages for personal growth and well-being. It acknowledges the dynamic nature of human development and emphasizes the integration of positive and negative psychosocial experiences.

4.2 Guilt as a Behavior Regulator

'There is a way to be good again' (p. 17), an expression from Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) reflects a history of some infringement, regret, guilt, hope, and a

secret of comfort and peace. We see people in this story whose behavior and action are changed after they feel stings of remorse: Amir says:

“That was a long time ago, but it’s wrong what they say about the past, I’ve learned, about how you can bury it, because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years” (Hosseini, 2003).

The constructive and reformatory approach of individuals that is developed only after the realization of the ruthlessness of their actions can be observed in Hosseini’s texts: “A boy who won’t stand up for himself becomes a man who can’t stand up to anything”, said by Amir’s baba (Hosseini, 2003; p. 20). Finally, at the age of thirty-eight years, Amir’s (a protagonist in *The Kite Runner*) guilt enables him to face the trouble and threat to amend things. He thinks,

“I looked at the round face in the Polaroid again, the way the sun fell on it. My brother’s face. Hassan had loved me once, loved me in a way that no one ever had or ever would again. He was gone now, but a little part of him lived on. It was in Kabul. Waiting” (Hosseini, 2003; p.199).

In Hosseini’s fiction (2003), guilt has been proven as an effective tool behind the maintenance of relationships. Emotions are an indispensable part of humanity. They make people realize how they understand various events in life. *Guilt and Children*, a deep and detailed analysis of guilt, depicts, “When people transgress against others, studies indicate that they spontaneously engage in several reconciliatory actions such as confession, concession, and apology to repair those relationships” (Bybee, 1998; p. 222).

Hosseini (2003) introduces several characters who violate social or moral standards in different ways and with time, their sense of regret insists to seek forgiveness. Amir is under a huge psychological disturbance and its effects have prevailed throughout his complete professional and married life. He relieves himself by taking a daring step of saving Qasim’s life.

Hosseini (2003) gives a variety of characters to his readers so that they may examine different situations and circumstances for the analysis of guilt.

Sanaubar, a guilty figure, tries to repair and amend her offense by apologizing, taking care of, and showing love to Hassan and his family. Rahim Khan tells Amir,

“Sometimes I would look out the window into the yard and watch Hassan and his mother kneeling together, picking tomatoes or trimming a rosebush, talking. They were catching up on all the lost years, I suppose. As far as I know, he never asked where she had been or why she had left and she never told. I guess some stories do not need telling”. (Hosseini, 2013; p. 20)

Hosseini describes the feelings of Sanaubar and her reactions when she takes newly born Sohrab in her hands, “She stood beaming under a dull gray sky, tears streaming down her cheeks, the needle-cold wind blowing her hair, and clutching that baby in her arms like she never wanted to let go. Not this time” (Hosseini, 2003; p. 228). She gives love, care, and affection to her family as she is feeling guilty and wants to express this to all of them.

“She sewed clothes for him and built him toys from scraps of wood, rags, and dried grass. When caught a fever, she stayed up all night and fasted for three days. She burned the island for him on a skillet to cast out Nazar, the evil eye. She lived to see him turn four, and then, one morning, she just did not wake up. She looked calm, at peace, like she did not mind dying now” (Hosseini, 2007; p.185).

Hosseini’s words determine how guilt becomes a cause of peace and comfort after forgiveness or amends. Agha Sahib, though, loves and takes care of Hassan but not like, he loves Amir. He always remains under the burden of his guilt and tries his best to deter this pain of regret. The following lines by Hosseini support Agha Sahib,

“I think everything he did, feeding the poor on the streets, building the orphanage, giving money to friends in need, It was all his way of redeeming himself. And that, I believe, is what true redemption is, Amir Jan, when guilt leads to good” (Hosseini, 2003; p. 263).

In *Guilt and Children*, Bybee's (1998) analysis sets the background of the novel, Once offenses occur, guilt motivates people to take prosocial behaviors that mend, restore, or remedy broken relationships. These sentiments of remorse also aid people in refraining from actions that endanger or harm relationships. Both the victim and the perpetrator gain from prosocial behaviors because they establish social ties and allow the victim to receive reparative acts instead of becoming the victim of transgression. The transgressor demonstrates their value for the connection by expressing regret and taking remedial action (Bybee, 1998; p. 228).

We see Nabi trying to relieve his burden of guilt by disclosing Pari's reality to her. The moments of the sight when both siblings were crying at the time of parting keep him in torment Nabi writes in his letter to Markos,

“I took those two helpless children, in whom love of the simplest and purest kind had found expression, and I tore one from the other.I will never forget the sudden emotional mayhem. Pari slung over my shoulders, panic-stricken, kicking her legs, shrieking, Abollah! Abollah! As I whisked her away. Abdullah, screaming his sister's name, tries to fight past his father. Nila, wide-eyed, her mouth covered with both hands, perhaps to silence her scream. It weighs on me. All this time has passed, Mr. Markos, and it still weighs on me. (Hosseini, 2013; p. 102)

The characters in Hosseini's most recent book, *And the Mountains Echoed*, are both criminals and regretful victims. Idrees was unable to keep his pledge to Roshi. He remembers the stick figures she had sketched for him when he discovers her to be a well-known poetess. “Don't leave. Keep here, Kaka” (Hosseini, 2008; p.171). His heart is being seized by guilt clenches. “He feels like he has never walked farther than he has to go to the car. He starts the car and takes a moment to get inside. He flips the book open once again with still-trembling hands” (Hosseini, 2007; p. 172). Pari constantly feels bad about her mother Mrs. Wahdati's behavior and attitude.

4.3 An Interpersonal Nexus

Guilt triggers us to maintain several interpersonal functions. It implies an action-control mechanism that promotes relationships and prevents damaging social bonds. In addition, it is because of this mechanism that guilt is capable of changing behavior and a guilty person always wants to do good for others. Guilt gives us some emotional signals that a particular line of action is acceptable or ought to be avoided. Durrant & Ensom (2020) says in an article, "In seeking ego identity, the youth is likely to engage with people and in activities that meet with parental and/or societal disapproval" (Durrant & Ensom, 2020, p. 36).

From the analysis of novels, we can easily analyze that guilty is positively correlated with healthy, caring, ethical, fair, and reliable behavior and it prevents aggressive and damaging behavior. Moreover, a guilty person's behavior depends largely on the level of his guilt. Higher guilt leads to higher tolerance and acceptance of others. The relationship between guilt to constructive social behavior is becoming increasingly well-established. This is Amir's guilt that encourages him to ignore Soraya's past; he says, "But I think a big part of the reason I didn't care about Soraya's past was that I had one of my own. I know all about regret" (Hosseini, 2013).

Prioritizing relationships over hedonistic experiences, such as adultery or self-indulgence, conveys the importance of the connection with loved ones. This decision shows a commitment to the partnership's well-being, demonstrating responsibility and consideration for their feelings. Choosing fidelity and self-control in the face of temptations communicates respect for shared values and commitments. Avoiding guilt and avoiding behaviors that could lead to disappointment contributes to a healthier relationship dynamic. Refusing hedonistic experiences in a relationship goes beyond self-discipline, expressing love, commitment, and a genuine desire to protect and enhance the connection.

Sanaubar tries to repair and amend her offense by apologizing, taking care of, and showing love to Hassan and his family. Agha Sahib, though, loves and takes care of Hassan but not the way he loves Amir. Sahib always remains under the burden of his guilt and tries his best to deter this pain. The following lines

by Hosseini support Agha Sahib, "I think everything he did, feeding the poor on the streets, building the orphanage, giving money to friends in need, It was all his way of redeeming himself. And that, I believe, is what true redemption is, Amir Jan, when guilt leads to good" (Hosseini, 2003).

Amir and Soraya are still childless after fifteen years of marriage. Amir's sense of moral guilt convinces him to accept this situation as a punishment or outcome of his offense, his violation of morality. They think of adopting a child but then change their decision. Amir says, "We all have our reasons for not adopting. Soraya had hers, the general his, and I had this: that perhaps something, someone, somewhere, had decided to deny me fatherhood for the things I had done. Maybe this was my punishment, and perhaps justly so" (Hosseini 2003).

Analysis of a text emphasizes that the perpetrator's desire for being forgiven will be as strong and intimate as his relationship with the victim is. Riek (2010) suggests this in his article "Transgression, Guilt and Forgiveness: A model of seeking Forgiveness" says that the idea of asking for forgiveness is connected to the feeling of guilt. Even while guilt is frequently considered a negative feeling, it can have a positive function. Guilt is a significant feeling from a theological standpoint since it serves as a reminder of one's transgressions and the necessity of receiving forgiveness from both God and others. According to Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton (1994), guilt is a social emotion that can be used to preserve and mend relationships (p. 247).

In "A Thousand Splendid Suns", Jalil's guilt leads him to regret, to seek an apology from her, to go to her home for forgiveness, and to take the judicious decision of property. He confesses, "I am merely giving you, if belatedly, what was rightfully yours all along. I was not a dutiful father to you in life. Perhaps in death I can be" (Hosseini 360). "Alternatively, control and punishment may create fear that forecloses the youth's opportunities to explore and understand who they truly are. These youth may adopt an identity that pleases the parents but does not satisfy the soul." (Durant & Ensom 2020; p. 40)

Repentance changes the thoughts, arouses the feeling of moral conscience, and puts the perpetrator in a situation where he realizes his violation and accepts

guilt. In this study, we come across many characters whose guilt leads them to repent, and then they seek forgiveness and a positive change occurs in their behavior. Feelings of repentance and shame, confession of sins, and seeking forgiveness are the hallmarks that develop a reformatory role of a guilty person in society. Forgiveness re-establishes social bonds and the perpetrator becomes committed to rational bonds. It frees people from the guilt that may have led them to engage in self-destructive behavior. To deter the pangs of guilt, repentance compels individuals to apologize. Repentance serves to change our minds and motivates us to improve things. True repentance involves acknowledging a better way to act and being willing to follow it, often considered a prerequisite for forgiveness.

Hosseini's whole fiction has been woven with strains of feelings, emotions, family connections, and moral boundaries. Most of his characters are with a sense of responsibility and show concern for family ties or moral bonds. *Shame and Guilt* is a meticulous effort to elaborate on the expression of guilt with all of its issues written by Tangney and Dearing. At one place it states, "The tension, remorse, and regret of guilt causes us to stop and re-think and it offers a way out, pressing us to confess, apologize, and make amends. We become better people and the world becomes a better place" (p. 180). As Erikson (1950) says that shame, guilt, and doubts are interconnected.

Hosseini sheds light on guilt's positive function that can help us bolster our relationships with others. Jalil's behavior after the birth of the illegitimate child Maryam makes Nana furious and guilty. This causes her mentally sick and she ends up her life by committing suicide. When interpersonal guilt is overused or combined with shame, it can become maladaptive. Moreover, the difficulty is caused by the shame element. Correlations have been shown between maladaptive interpersonal guilt and several psychological issues, including sensitivity, sadness, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

Albertsen & O'Connor (2006) in their essay make a similar contribution. However, according to this article, guilt has a substantial relationship with ethnicity, affiliation, and emphasis on religion and spirituality. In this

discussion, interpersonal guilt levels—a term that has been linked to several psychological issues—are compared to ethnicities. It suggests, “Although interpersonal guilt also has a close relationship with shame, there is evidence that interpersonal guilt has an even stronger relationship with psychopathology, such as depression than shame. Unlike basic, shame-free guilt, which does not correlate with psychopathology, maladaptive interpersonal guilt has correlations with psychopathology” (p. 69).

5. Findings

The research finds that interpersonal relationships are mutual connections that construct social bonds. People, who give importance to these social ties, always suffer guilt whenever they produce any loss for the people around them. This study shows how a guilty person takes responsibility for his offense and how he or she tries to amend his/her virtuous role.

Guilt is rather a positive emotion and can act as a tool that can repair relationships and heal past wounds. The tendency to experience guilt is considered a fair trait that is necessary for establishing an ethical setup in society. Guilt encourages individuals to learn from their mistakes and modify their behavior to prevent the repetition of harmful actions. Guilt is a blessing when it is without maladaptive responses. Guilt surfaces as a feeling that encourages offenders to induce reform in society. It adds well and lessens bad.

6. Conclusion

It has been inferred that Hosseini’s fiction can be taken as explicatory evidence for the analysis of lapses in behavior. The research on moral emotions predicts guilt as a regulatory power to repair social or moral ties and strengthen relationships. Throughout the study, it has been asserted that living in a society is not a trivial matter hence it is a great responsibility of every human being to be moral. The actions we take, the things we do, and the important things we do not do, have consequences on our environment and the others around us.

Being a part of a social group, everyone needs to govern one's behavior better so that it may not hurt other people.

The study emphasizes that when people play a healthy role in society, they feel pride and confidence. Similarly, when they transgress or err, aversive feelings of guilt and regret are likely to ensue. The study concludes that people inevitably misbehave by offending others, themselves, or religious or spiritual entities by failing to uphold the desired standard. In various cases, this infringement takes the wrongdoer towards bitter feelings of guilt. Guilt is a painful intropunitive feeling that is the outcome of flawed behavior. Life with guilt feelings becomes a trial for the transgressor and diminishes his self-worth and self-respect and this is the point where the offender decides to get rid of this agony, either by quitting society or by becoming a beneficial part of society. A detailed and thorough discussion of the study concludes that if transgressional behavior drives feelings of guilt then guilt ultimately motivates the transgressor to do something for repairing the damage he did. In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini's words (2003), "There is a way to be good again" (p. 02) give evidence for this whole discussion of the study. These words ensure the existence of virtue behind the feelings of guilt.

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development makes it clear to Hosseini's fiction that there is a definitional connection between morality and guilt. Feelings of guilt are warranted if a person knows that he or she has acted morally wrong. Hosseini highlights the social adaptiveness of guilt and its orientation toward others. Moral standards determine the norms and conventions of society and they represent people's responses toward those conventions. Hosseini's fiction gives evidence that at first; people consider the rules of a society just like obstacles in the fulfillment of their desired life and feel discontent for being a part of that society. This dissatisfaction convinces them, finally, to transgress and violate those norms for the accomplishment of their wishes.

Hosseini's fiction shows that guilt alone source of relief if a person does not develop a healthy change in thoughts and behavior. Guilt is a blessing when it

is without maladaptive responses. Experience of maladaptive guilt brings devastation to the offender. The study infers that the human capacity for this moral emotion is both, a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing for those who get the opportunity to amend or heal the damage they caused in a relationship. But the people whose guilt keeps them in emotional distress become dejected and it causes disappointment, hopelessness, and fear among them. The study sums up the discussion by concluding that a destructive sense of guilt makes its victim so much more aggressive and there is no choice for the victim except choosing death.

The study concludes that guilt is rather a positive emotion and can act as a tool that can repair relationships and heal past wounds. Guilt is a self-conscious emotion that occurs when a person believes he has done something wrong or is not accepted as unacceptable to others. It motivates to take decisions that are morally right and socially adaptable the tendency to experience guilt is considered a fair trait that is necessary for establishing an ethical setup in society. Guilt encourages individuals to learn from their mistakes and modify their behavior to prevent the repetition of harmful actions. It impels people to pay more attention to their relationships and to protect and preserve them.

The current study clarifies the function of guilt as a social emotion that affects how people make decisions about one another. Guilt inspires smart and targeted philanthropy to maintain social ties, as Erikson says (1964). Numerous theoretical arguments support the idea that guilt motivates people to act kindly and conform to social standards. One is more likely to accept responsibility for their actions and make an effort to correct past mistakes when they are feeling guilty.

Therefore, guilt is a developmentally advanced self-conscious emotion that evaluates one's behavior. Throughout the discussion, guilt surfaces as a feeling that encourages offenders to induce reform in society. Feeling guilty becomes like a source of relief for offenders and their behavior is inclined towards the reform of society this significant change of attitude proves a blessing for other people who get comfort and benefit from these guilty people.

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